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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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It's another one of those weeks in which I don't have a lot to say. So, in the interest of letting you all get right to this week's issue, I'll just let this week pass by without any commentary!

Until next time...

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Obama Asks Congress To Commission Violent Games Study!
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Missouri Lawmaker Wants Violent Video Games Taxed!

PlayStation 4 Could Be Unveiled in May!
And more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Obama Asks Congress To Commission Violent Games Study

Ever since the tragic shooting at an elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut, American politicians have been scrambling to concoct new legislation in an attempt to stem the tide of violent and unfortunate outbursts such as the one carried out late last year.

President Barack Obama revealed a slew of possible actions, many suggested by a task force headed-up by Vice President Joe Biden, including the use of 23 executive orders and a series of suggestions to Congress.

As pointed out by the Washington Times, embedded in his suggestions to

Congress is the requested allocation of $10 million to study violent media. However, it s not as significant as it seems, with Times author Stephen Dinan noting that President Obama s pushback against gun violence focuses heavily on new firearms restrictions and on mental health, but video games and movies   two cultural issues that many Americans blame for violence   get little attention.

The requested money amounts to, in governmental terms, an incredibly paltry sum. The American government spends over $10 billion dollars per day.

Nonetheless, should Congress vote to allocate $10 million to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the group will be able to undertake a study investigating the relationship between video games, media images and violence. But here s the important part, according to Stephen Dinan: overall, the White House said that while limiting guns is the role of the government, controlling what Americans see in movies and games is best left to parents.

With Congress at an impasse over a much more serious issue in the form of the debt ceiling, it s unclear whether the Republican-controlled House of Representatives and the Democrat-controlled Senate will agree to any of Obama s suggestions, nonetheless this one. However, we ll keep you posted if and when legislation is officially drafted and sent to Congress.

Missouri Lawmaker Wants Violent Video Games Taxed

A rural Missouri lawmaker wants her state to tax certain video games to help curb gun violence. The Associated Press reports state Rep. Diane Franklin, R-Camdenton, believes a 1 percent sales tax on video games rated teen, mature and adults only would help finance mental health programs aimed at reducing gun violence such as the recent mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn.

What does the legislation propose?

House Bill 157 proposes to create "an excise tax based on the gross receipts or gross proceeds of each sale" of video games rated by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB). The tax also involves the "storage, use or other consumption" of violent video games in Missouri including "tangible personal property." This means the tax could extend to memorabilia derived from the games such as toys, clothing and video game accessories.

How does the legislation hope to enhance public safety?

The law hopes to procure "new and additional funding for treatment of mental health conditions associated with exposure to violent video games... ." The revenue from the tax cannot be used to replace existing revenue already in place. Franklin deems the legislation "necessary for the immediate preservation of the public health, welfare, peace and safety." Therefore, if the legislation passes it will go into effect immediately. There is no mention in the legislation as to how much revenue should be generated, nor does it say whether the sales tax is just on new merchandise as opposed to used games on the secondary market.

Have similar laws been considered before?

A similar proposal was struck down in mid-February in Oklahoma. Democrat William Fourkiller crafted legislation in 2012 that is very similar to Franklin's idea in Missouri. A subcommittee struck down the bill by a 6-5 margin. Fourkiller, in defending the law , said it wasn't a "magic bullet" but that Oklahoma had "to start somewhere" to curb childhood violence. Oklahoma also would have taxed ESRB teen, mature and adults only games at a rate of 1 percent.

Does the Missouri law have a chance to pass?

CNN notes a federal appeals court made a ruling in 2003 that video games are free speech protected by the First Amendment. Ironically, it was a federal case stemming from St. Louis County, Mo., that created the precedent for video games as free speech. Senior U.S. District Judge Stephen Limbaugh's decision was reversed by an appellate panel. The ruling came shortly after the state of Washington banned the sale of certain video games to children under the age of 17. Gamasutra reveals New Mexico also tried, and failed, to pass a similar law in 2008.

What are Franklin's credentials as they relate to the proposed bill?

Franklin was first elected in 2010 from Camdenton. She is a mother of two sons and served on Camdenton School Board from 1993 to 1999. She sits on the House Appropriations-Education committee. Franklin is a third-generation small business owner and comes from a farming family. Missouri Republicans currently have a veto-proof supermajority in the General Assembly. Camdenton is a small city of around 3,700 people near Lake of the Ozarks in central Missouri.

PlayStation 4 Could Be Unveiled in May

A Sony executive may have revealed the company s upcoming plan to announce its highly anticipated PlayStation 4 console. Hiroshi Sakamoto, deputy senior general manager of Home Entertainment at Sony, said in an interview with Chilean news website Emol that the company could announce its next-generation gaming console in May. It had previously been speculated that both Sony and Microsoft (MSFT) would unveil their latest consoles at the Electronic Entertainment Expo in June. An earlier announcement would allow the PlayStation 4 to receive more press, however, rather than competing with the Xbox 720. Sakamoto said that an announcement may be in [E3] or even earlier in May, adding in that time we expect to deliver great news, but we must wait until May at least.

PlayStation 4 and Xbox 720 Could Cost Just $350

Sony and Microsoft are both expected to announce their next-generation gaming consoles at the Electronics Entertainment Expo in June, or even a little before then. While we have seen rumored specs for both the PlayStation 4 and the Xbox 720, one thing that has escaped us is a possible price tag. In a research note to investors on Monday, Colin Sebastian of Baird Equity Research suggested that both consoles could retail for between $350 and $400 in the U.S., Games Industry International reported. The analyst revealed that during the Consumer Electronics Show

last week he spent time with a number of companies involved in video game development and distribution, who informed him that the next-generation consoles will be largely built from off the shelf high-end PC components, along with hybrid physical/digital distribution models, enhanced voice controls and motion sensing, and broad multi-media capabilities.

Sebastian believes that a PC-based architecture (Intel chips in the case of Xbox) should have a number of advantages over custom-developed silicon. In his opinion, there will be less of a learning curve for software developers compared to completely new technology, and the cost of production and retail price points should be lower than prior console launches.

Microsoft launched the Xbox 360 in 2005 with a top end price of $399, while Sony released the PlayStation 3 a year later for $499 and $599 respectively.

It will be easier to build online services around PC chip architecture, including flexible business models (free-to-play, subscriptions) and multi-media (over the top) content offerings, the analyst added. For Microsoft, this design will also allow for more integration with Windows 8 and Windows Mobile devices.

Sebastian expects Sony to launch the PlayStation 4 in October and Microsoft to launch the Xbox 720 in November.

Ex-Red Sox Pitcher Schilling Puts Bloody Sock Up for Auction

Former Boston Red Sox pitcher Curt Schilling whose video game company underwent a spectacular collapse into bankruptcy last year is selling the blood-stained sock he wore during the 2004 World Series.

Chris Ivy, director of sports for Texas-based Heritage Auctions, says online bidding begins around Feb. 4. Live bidding will take place Feb. 23.

The sock previously had been on loan to the National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum. It has been at Heritage’s Dallas headquarters for several weeks and will be displayed at the auction house’s Manhattan office before it is sold, according to Ivy.

He said the sock is expected to fetch at least $100,000, though he described that as a conservative estimate.

"I do expect the bidding to be very spirited," Ivy said.

Schilling’s company, 38 Studios, was lured to Providence, R.I., from Massachusetts with a $75 million loan guarantee in 2010. In May, it laid off all its employees and it filed for bankruptcy in June. The state is now likely responsible for some $100 million related to the deal, including interest.

Schilling also had personally guaranteed loans to the company and listed the sock as bank collateral in a September filing with the Massachusetts secretary of state’s office.

Messages left for his publicist were not immediately returned.

The bloody sock is one of two that sent Schilling into the annals of baseball lore in 2004.

The other was from Game 6 of the American League Championship Series, when Schilling pitched against the New York Yankees with an injured ankle. That sock is said to have been discarded in the trash at Yankees Stadium.

The one being sold is from the second game of the World Series, which the Red Sox won that year for the first time in 86 years.

Schilling has said he invested as much as $50 million in 38 Studios and has lost all his baseball earnings. He told WEEI-AM in Boston last year that possibly having to sell the sock was part of "having to pay for your mistakes."

"I’m obligated to try and make amends and, unfortunately, this is one of the byproducts of that," he told the station.

Brad Horn, a spokesman for the hall of fame in Cooperstown, N.Y., said the loaned sock was returned in December under the terms of the hall’s agreement with Schilling. The hall had had it since 2004.

The Feb. 23 live bidding will be held at the Fletcher-Sinclair mansion in New York City, now home to the Ukrainian Institute of America. The auction will feature other "five- and six-figure items," including a jersey and cap worn by New York Yankees great Lou Gehrig, Ivy said.

Heritage last May auctioned off the so-called "Bill Buckner ball," which rolled through the legs of the Red Sox first baseman in the 1986 World Series. Ivy said that item, like Schilling’s sock, was listed at the time as being expected to bring in "$100,000-plus," but it was sold to an anonymous bidder for $418,000.

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A-ONE’s Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Aaron Swartz Commits Suicide

Computer activist Aaron H. Swartz committed suicide in New York City yesterday, Jan. 11, according to his uncle, Michael Wolf, in a comment to The Tech. Swartz was 26.

The tragic and heartbreaking information you received is, regrettably, true, confirmed Swartz attorney, Elliot R. Peters of Kecker and Van Nest, in an email to The Tech.

Swartz was indicted in July 2011 by a federal grand jury for allegedly downloading millions of documents from JSTOR through the MIT network using a laptop hidden in a basement network closet in MIT s Building 16

with the intent to distribute them. Swartz subsequently moved to Brooklyn, New York, where he then worked for Avaaz Foundation, a nonprofit global web movement to bring people-powered politics to decision-making everywhere. Swartz appeared in court on Sept. 24, 2012 and pleaded not guilty.

The accomplished Swartz co-authored the now widely-used RSS 1.0 specification at age 14, founded Infogami which later merged with the popular social news site reddit, and completed a fellowship at Harvard s Ethics Center Lab on Institutional Corruption. In 2010, he founded DemandProgress.org, a campaign against the Internet censorship bills SOPA/PIPA.

Reddit Founder’s Death Fuels Probe

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology has launched an internal probe of the events leading up to the suicide of internet activist Aaron Swartz, who was facing federal charges for allegedly hacking into the school’s journal archives.

"It pains me to think that MIT played any role in a series of events that have ended in tragedy," MIT President L. Rafael Reif said in a statement. "Now is a time for everyone involved to reflect on their actions, and that includes all of us at MIT."

Swartz’ legal troubles began two years ago when prosecutors said he illegally downloaded millions of scientific journals from MIT and JSTOR, a journal storage repository. Swartz, 26, had been an advocate for open access and the freedom of information online.

He was due to stand trial in April, and if convicted, could have faced decades in prison and millions of dollars in fines. Swartz had pleaded not guilty to the charges.

Hal Abelson, a professor at MIT, who is also founding director of both Creative Commons and the Free Software Foundation, has been tapped to lead the school’s internal probe.

"I have asked that this analysis describe the options MIT had and the decisions MIT made, in order to understand and to learn from the actions MIT took," Reif said.

Furor over Swartz’ death has reached the White House in the form of a petition asking for the removal of U.S. Attorney Carmen Ortiz who pressed the case against Swartz.

The petition has been signed by nearly 12,000 people and needs 25,000 signatures by Feb. 11 to garner an official response from the White House.

Swartz’s family and supporters have laid blame for his death on an aggressive prosecution that used its powers to "hound him into a position where he was facing a ruinous trial, life in prison."

"Aaron’s death is not simply a personal tragedy. It is the product of a criminal justice system rife with intimidation and prosecutorial overreach," Swartz’ family and partner said in a statement that also had harsh words for MIT.

"Decisions made by officials in the Massachusetts U.S. Attorney's office and at MIT contributed to his death," the statement said.

JSTOR, which had stated it did not want to pursue charges against Swartz, posted a statement offering condolences to his family.

"He was a truly gifted person who made important contributions to the development of the internet and the web from which we all benefit," JSTOR said in a statement. "The case is one that we ourselves had regretted being drawn into from the outset."

If the aftermath of his death, the justice department said it was dropping all charges against him pro-forma, since there was no longer a defendant to prosecute and the mysterious hackers' group Anonymous broke onto the MIT website and posted a message in his memory.

The message, before the page was taken down, said, among other things, "We call for this tragedy to be a basis for reform of computer crime laws, and the overzealous prosecutors who use them."

When Swartz was 14, he helped create RSS software, revolutionizing the way people subscribed to and consumed information online.

As an adult, he co-founded Reddit, a social news website, and railed against Internet censorship through the political action group Demand Progress.

His funeral is scheduled for Tuesday, in Highland Park, Ill., his family said, and they said that remembrances of Swartz and donations in his name could be made at rememberaaronsw.com.

Anonymous Hackers Down MIT Website After Aaron Swartz Suicide

The hacker group Anonymous took down the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's website Monday morning in retaliation for the role it felt the college played in researcher Aaron Swartz's suicide.

Swartz, a political activist and computer programmer, reportedly hanged himself last week in his Brooklyn apartment as he awaited trial on 13 felony counts for downloading and publishing roughly 4 million academic journal articles from the database JSTOR.

He allegedly used the university's network to download the data.

Swartz's family and partner issued a statement over the weekend, accusing the college of having a role in his death, saying "decisions made by officials in the Massachusetts U.S. attorney's office and at M.I.T. contributed to his death" and that "M.I.T. refused to stand up for Aaron and its own community's most cherished principles."

From 4 p.m. to 7:50 p.m. PT on Sunday evening, M.I.T.'s network lost access to most websites, including mit.edu, where Anonymous posted a red-lettered message in Swartz's honor.

"Whether or not the government contributed to his suicide, the government's prosecution of Swartz was a grotesque miscarriage of

justice, a distorted and perverse shadow of the justice that Aaron died fighting for â " freeing the publicly-funded scientific literature from a publishing system that makes it inaccessible to most of those who paid for it â " enabling the collective betterment of the world through the facilitation of sharing â " an ideal that we should all support," said the message.

Kimberly Allen, the media relations manager at M.I.T., did not immediately respond to a call from TheWrap requesting comment.

President Rafael Reif asked computer science professor Hal Abelson on Sunday to "lead a thorough analysis of M.I.T.’s involvement from" in Swartz’s case.

How to Fix America’s Harmful Hacking Laws

Many technology-law experts feel there’s too much leeway for prosecutors under the 1986 Computer Fraud and Abuse Act, allowing prosecutors to rack up serious charges for what may seem like minor offenses to outsiders.

The Aaron Swartz case may be a perfect example of such overreach. The young programmer, who was indicted twice under the CFAA, faced 50 years in prison for allegedly downloading 4 million academic-journal articles.

Swartz hanged himself in his Brooklyn apartment last week, two days after his lawyer and prosecutors reportedly failed to reach a plea deal.

Adam Goldstein, an attorney advocate at the Student Press Law Center in Arlington, Va., said, "the language of [the CFAA] could be tighter, [but] that’s not why things are going horribly wrong" with computer-related prosecutions.

"What’s going wrong with these prosecutions," he said, "is that any prosecutor in any corner of the country can prosecute a computer crime, even though he or she may know absolutely nothing about computers and have only a rudimentary understanding of what the laws were even designed to prohibit."

In the Swartz case, the online archive from which Swartz downloaded the journal articles chose not to press charges.

But the U.S. attorney for Massachusetts, Carmen Ortiz, did.

Not only did her office issue a four-count indictment of Swartz in July 2011, with maximum penalties of 35 years in prison, but in September 2012 it superseded the original filing with a 13-count indictment that added 15 more years.

"These sentences make no sense to me," said Chester Wisniewski, a senior security analyst in the Vancouver, British Columbia, office of the British firm Sophos. "While I take copyright and digital crime very seriously, I can’t explain or justify these penalties."

On Wednesday (Jan. 16), Ortiz issued a statement that she and her office didn’t really intend to throw Swartz into prison for five decades.

"There was no evidence against Mr. Swartz indicating that he committed his

acts for personal financial gain," Ortiz said. "This office sought an appropriate sentence that matched the alleged conduct a sentence that we would recommend to the judge of six months in a low-security setting."

The charges against Swartz were dropped after his suicide.

"In my experience, U.S. attorneys tend to throw the book at defendants," said former federal public defender Hanni Fakhoury, a staff attorney at the Electronic Frontier Foundation in San Francisco.

"The ’tough’ prosecutors are the ones who get promoted and have their careers advanced," he said. "This isn’t unique to Aaron’s case or the CFAA: it’s a problem in federal criminal law, period."

Robert Graham, chief executive officer of Errata Security in Atlanta, said it comes down to the way the CFAA and related laws were written.

"Laws target the means rather than the ends," Graham said. "This allows you to be prosecuted because you use the same means [as a criminal], but for legitimate ends. Almost anybody can be prosecuted for illegal use of a computer if prosecutors wanted to."

Christopher Soghoian, a senior policy analyst at the American Civil Liberties Union, was more blunt.

"The offenses that Swartz was accused of were not motivated by profit, nor did they involve actual hacking," Soghoian said.

"Federal prosecutors could and should have shown restraint in their case against Swartz and instead focused their limited resources investigating other, more serious computer hacking crimes."

Is Congress likely to craft and pass legislation to fix the CFAA? Many, if not most, members of Congress don’t know much about how computers work.

Meanwhile, leading lawmakers and government officials have been telling the public that hackers have the capability to destroy America.

Some experts we spoke to think reform of the CFAA and related statutes might be possible even in such a political environment.

"Change has to come from them [Congress], ultimately, and I’m convinced if we get enough people concerned about the abuse of this law, there can be some meaningful reform," Fakhoury said. "They did, after all, drop SOPA [the Stop Online Piracy Act] when it became clear there was a lot of dissatisfaction with it."

"I think we can trust Congress to do this, honestly, because I think they know that they don’t understand these crimes," Goldstein said. "I believe they can understand that their ignorance is doing harm. And what member of Congress wants to oppose creating a system that will better prosecute electronic crimes?"

Rep. Zoe Lofgren, D-Calif., introduced a bill Tuesday (Jan. 15) to amend the CFAA and a related fraud statute.

Her proposal, which she called "Aaron’s Law," would exclude violations of private agreements and obligations, such terms-of-service agreements, acceptable-use policies and employment contracts, from being considered unauthorized access.

It would, in essence, mean you'd no longer be breaking the law by using a friend's Netflix account.

It's not clear whether Lofgren's amendment would have prevented Swartz's prosecution, however.

A prosecutor might have argued that Swartz, who used MIT's on-campus network to download the archived journal articles, was not associated with MIT and hence was not party to the contractual agreement MIT had with the academic archive.

Graham was less optimistic about the prospect for legislative reform, observing that Congress responds "to the will of the people, and the people don't understand this issue, either."

"The people don't know how computers work. It's all witchcraft to them," he added. "Hackers are witches; the people want to see them burned."

Instead, Graham suggested abolishing the CFAA entirely.

"The solution is not to reform it, but remove it," he said. "Focus on the actual crimes, such as espionage or stealing money, and not on the idea of 'accessing a computer without authorization.'"

Goldstein, on the other hand, thinks the solution to handling electronic infractions already exists it just isn't being used properly.

"When we have an area of the law we think is really complicated, we set up some kind of body, either investigative or judicial, to help ensure the laws are enforced correctly," he said.

"After Sept. 11, the federal government realized that terrorism cases are sophisticated, subtle and aren't easy for your average cops and prosecutors to identify. The Department of Justice set up the Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF), a clearing house for terrorism information with local groups of experts set up to analyze and prosecute terrorism crimes.

"The Patriot Act itself also directed the Secret Service to set up the Electronic Crimes Task Force," Goldstein said. "But electronic crime prosecutions just aren't being 'cleared' through ECTF the same way terrorism prosecutions are cleared through JTTF.

"If you search the ECTF website, Aaron's name doesn't come up, which makes you wonder what the heck it's for. So what needs to happen, really and truly, is for the ECTF to become a branch of the Department of Justice like the JTTF, so it [becomes] able to meaningfully involve itself in these cases the way JTTF does."

How Computer-Hacking Laws Make You a Criminal

In 1970, a 14-year-old boy dialed into a nationwide computer network, uploaded a virus he had written and caused the entire network to crash.

That boy was Bill Gates. Five years later, he founded Microsoft.

A few years later, two young men went around college dorms in California selling boxes of wires that let students bypass telephone-company restrictions and make long-distance calls for free.

Those young men were Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, and a later venture they started, Apple, is now the most valuable company in the world.

In 2010, another young man, who had already founded a multimillion-dollar company, broke into a utility closet at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

He hooked up a laptop to the campus network and downloaded 4 million academic journal articles, most of them in the public domain, from a paid archive to which he had a subscription.

He was arrested, indicted twice on multiple counts of fraud and, at a trial that was to have begun in April, faced 50 years in federal prison and a $1 million fine.

His name was Aaron Swartz, and last week he hanged himself.

The difference between the fates of Gates, Jobs and Wozniak on the one hand, and of Swartz on the other, originates with the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act.

The CFAA is a 1986 law, section 1030 of the federal criminal code, which makes any unauthorized access into a protected network or computer a federal crime and permits harsh penalties for those convicted.

But 1986 was a long time ago. Today, any Web server can be defined as a protected computer, and almost anything can be defined as unauthorized access.

Use your roommate’s Netflix account to watch movies on your iPad? You’re violating the CFAA.

Trim the URLs of articles on the New York Times website so you can read them for free? You’re breaking federal law.

Check your Facebook page at work, even if your employer forbids it? Better call your lawyer.

If that sounds ridiculous, here’s a fact: Andrew "Weev" Auernheimer, a well-known "gray hat" hacker, was convicted in November of fraud and conspiracy for harvesting data from a publicly accessible server. He’s facing up to 10 years in prison at his sentencing next month.

There weren’t any passwords protecting the data Auernheimer and his friend, who later testified against him, downloaded. All they did was change numbers in URLs and press "return." But according to the CFAA, they were breaking the law.

"The punishments for these crimes are hugely disproportionate to the offenses listed," said Adam Goldstein, an attorney advocate at the Student Press Law Center in Arlington, Va. "We wrote these laws based on the 1980s view of the worst-case scenario of hacking in a networked world."

To Robert Graham, chief executive officer of Errata Security in Atlanta, the CFAA is "hopelessly out of date, and can be used to prosecute anybody for almost anything."

"The issue is ’authorization,’" Graham said. "Back in 1986, everyone had to be explicitly authorized to use a computer with an assigned username and password.

"But today, with the Web, we access computers with reckless abandon without knowing whether we are authorized or not," he added. "When you click on a URL, you are technically in violation of the law as it was designed."

Swartz was facing more prison time than he would have if he’d committed a serious physical crime, such as assault, burglary, grand theft larceny or involuntary manslaughter.

"Why the penalties are stiffer for e-crime does not make sense," said Chester Wisniewski, an American who works as a senior security analyst in the Vancouver, British Columbia, office of the British security firm Sophos. "These penalties are more in line with murder than theft."

"There is a serious problem in federal criminal law where the use of a computer ratchets up a criminal sentence dramatically out of proportion from the harm caused," said Hanni Fakhoury, a staff attorney at the Electronic Frontier Foundation in San Francisco.

"We wrote laws designed to punish the worst monsters of William Gibson’s nightmares," Goldstein said. "We’re wielding them against people who download journal articles and steal naked pictures from Scarlett Johansson."

Teens Facing Charges after Threats Against School on Facebook

Three Quebec City teens have been charged with planning a shooting at their high school.

The three teens — two boys aged 14 and 15 and a 16-year-old girl — face charges of conspiracy to commit murder and will remain detained until a bail hearing Monday.

They have pleaded not guilty to the charges.

Police arrested the three early Thursday morning after receiving a phone call from the administration at Le Sommet, a high school in a Quebec City suburb.

Quebec City police spokeswoman Catherine Viel says the three are accused of hatching a plan on Facebook — allegedly a clear plan to cause the deaths of many people at the school.

The alleged plot was directed at school administrators, teachers and students.

After questioning the three teens, authorities decided the serious charges were warranted.

A search of the students’ lockers did not turn up any weapons and police couldn’t say if they had access to any.

But the use of firearms was part of the alleged plot, Viel said, adding that the accused spoke specifically about guns and explosives online.

1.4 Million Americans Reportedly Ditched Facebook in December

We may have finally hit peak Facebook. Per MarketWatch, new data from social media tracking company SocialBakers found that the number of Americans using Facebook fell by nearly 1.4 million in early December. What s more, SocialBakers CEO Jan Rezab told MarketWatch that Facebook is possibly getting to a point where the less engaged part of the audience doesn t visit every 30 days, meaning the social network has very little room to grow in markets where it s already highly saturated. Of course, since Facebook still has more than 1 billion users worldwide and 167 million in the United States alone, the company can afford to lose 1.4 million here or there. The question is whether this user loss is a mere blip or the start of a trend.

Facebook Search To Generate Revenue, No Rival to Google

Facebook Inc’s new search tool has strong potential to generate revenue for the social networking company, though it is unlikely to challenge Google Inc as the world’s dominant search engine, Wall Street analysts said on Wednesday.

Facebook’s "graph search" tool, rolled out on Tuesday, lets its more than 1 billion users trawl their network of friends to find everything from restaurants to movie recommendations and is the company’s biggest foray into online search.

Graph search contains some category suggestions that can be easily monetized, BofA Merrill Lynch analysts said in a note.

"It should be easy to incorporate commercial search results via Facebook’s partnership with Bing," they added.

Facebook currently has a partnership with Microsoft Corp, whose Bing search engine provides search results for external websites. Microsoft also integrates certain Facebook results into its Bing search results.

BofA Merrill Lynch analysts estimated Facebook could add $500 million in annual revenue if it can generate just one paid click per user per year, and raised its price target on the stock by $4 to $35.

Facebook’s shares were flat at $30.10 in early trading on Wednesday. They have jumped about 50 percent since November to Tuesday’s close after months of weakness following its bungled Nasdaq listing in May.

However, analysts at J.P. Morgan Securities said the lack of a timeline for the possible launch of graph search on mobile devices may weigh on the tool’s prospects.

The success of the graph search, which will rely heavily on local information, depends on Facebook launching a mobile product, the analysts said. Half of all searches on mobile devices seek local information,

according to Google.

Graph search also lacks the depth of review content of Yelp Inc, the analysts added.

Pivotal Research Group analyst Brian Wieser said monetization potential would be largely determined by Facebook’s ability to generate a significant portion of search query share volumes and he expects that quantity to be relatively low.

"Consumers are likely to continue prioritizing other sources, i.e. Google. Advertisers would consequently only use search if they can, or are perceived to, satisfy their goals efficiently with Facebook," Wieser said.

Analysts mostly agreed that Facebook’s search tool was unlikely to challenge Google’s dominance in web search at least in the near term.

"As of now, we do not see Graph Search as a threat to Google Web search. Looking forward, Facebook Graph searches could be competitive with certain categories of Google searches, such as Places and Maps," BofA Merrill said.

Internet search, social networking tools and e-commerce are among the biggest weapons that companies such as Facebook, Google and Amazon.com Inc. have in their battle for supremacy. A successful combination of the three could win the day for them.

Google has been trying to combine social networking and search for more than a year by integrating Google+ into its search engine.

"Overall, Graph Search offers users a unique view to information not available on Google, but does not replace Google. We view the relationship between Facebook Graph Search and Google as both competitive and complementary," Piper Jaffray & Co analysts said.

The brokerage said users looking to buy a cellphone, for example, could search for friends’ reviews on Facebook and expert reviews on Google.

Fedora Linux Lets You Choose Your Own GUI Adventure

Linux fans hope that the interface changes in Windows 8 will drive more users to Linux. But the open source operating system is facing interface challenges of its own. Part of the problem is that after so much controversy within the Linux community there are so many interfaces to chose from. But the new version of Fedora a desktop focused version of Red Hat s distribution of Linux is offering users an easier way to choose between the many flavors of Linux GUI.

The controversy began when the team behind GNOME one of the most popular desktop environments for Linux unveiled version 3.0, which made drastic changes to the user interface. Reaction was, shall we say, mixed. Then Ubuntu announced that it would provide its own interface on top of GNOME, called Unity. The response was even worse.

Some, like GNOME co-founder Miguel de Icaza, say the interface wars are not as important as other issues in Linux, like ensuring compatibility with older versions of the operating system. But the subject still really

gets geeks going. Linus Torvalds, the opinionated creator of the Linux kernel, famously switched from GNOME to the alternative Xfce, but ended up switching back to GNOME.

One of the big issues is the lack of choice on particular Linux distributions. Ubuntu install discs only include Unity. If you want a different window manager, you either have to add it after installing Ubuntu, or you have to start with variant of Ubuntu made specifically to use an alternate desktop environment, such as Kubuntu or Xubuntu. But you have to know that you want something other than Unity.

That s where Fedora comes in. Fedora 18 code named Spherical Cow, after an old physics joke offers popular desktop environments GNOME, KDE, and Xfce, as well as lesser known options Cinnamon and MATE.

The later two are both forks of GNOME. Forks are when a developer or development team take the source code of an existing project and change or extend it, usually creating a new independent version of the original project. MATE is a fork and continuation of GNOME 2 created in 2011. Cinnamon is a fork of GNOME 3 from the developers of Linux Mint, which is itself a fork of Ubuntu.

The Linux desktop wars are far from over, but at least Fedora is helping users decide for themselves who the winners should be.

Facebook Launches Free Calling for All iPhone Users in the US

In early January, Facebook began testing free calling over Wi-Fi and cellular data for all Messenger for iPhone users in Canada, and said that a US launch could be coming soon. Apparently, the test went well a new free calling button has appeared in the app. Facebook has confirmed to The Verge that the feature began rolling out to US users today, and requires no update through the App Store. To make a call to another Messenger for iPhone user, all you need to do is open a conversation with that person, tap the "i" button in the top-right corner, and tap Free Call.

What this means is that if you live in the US, you can now call other Facebook users for free over Wi-Fi or using your phone’s data connection while you’re on the go. When you call someone, a push notification appears on their screen that says "Ellis Hamburger is calling," for example. The feature is especially critical for people with bad cell service at work or at home, and for those who want to conserve cell phone minutes. It’s also a huge step for Facebook which with a single feature emerges as one of the largest communities of VoIP users in the world. After a few tests, the call quality sounds very good, and is certainly on par with competitors Viber, Vonage, and Skype which have had the feature for some time, but all have much smaller user bases.

Facebook has had a partnership with Skype for video calling inside Facebook’s website since summer 2011, but Messenger still notably lacks video calling. Facebook offered no more details or information about an international rollout, VoIP calling through its Messenger for Android app, or VoIP calling through its website, but we’d bet these things are coming soon.

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